

Insight 6

Report Card on the Diet Quality of African Americans

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The Healthy Eating Index (HEI), computed on a regular basis by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), is a summary measure of people's overall diet quality. The most recent HEI report found that Americans' diet quality varies by demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. Of the various population subgroups, African Americans have a diet of particularly poor quality. This *Nutrition Insight* examines the diet of African Americans in more depth. Data used are from USDA's 1994-96 Continuing Survey of Food Intakes by Individuals, a nationally representative survey containing information on food consumption and nutrient intake.

Healthy Eating Index

The Healthy Eating Index consists of 10 components, each representing different aspects of a healthful diet:

- Components 1-5 measure the degree to which a person's diet conforms to the USDA's Food Guide Pyramid serving recommendations for the five major food groups: Grains (bread, cereal, rice, and pasta), vegetables, fruits, milk (milk, yogurt, and cheese), and meat (meat, poultry, fish, dry beans, eggs, and nuts).
- Component 6 measures total fat consumption as a percentage of total food energy (calorie) intake.

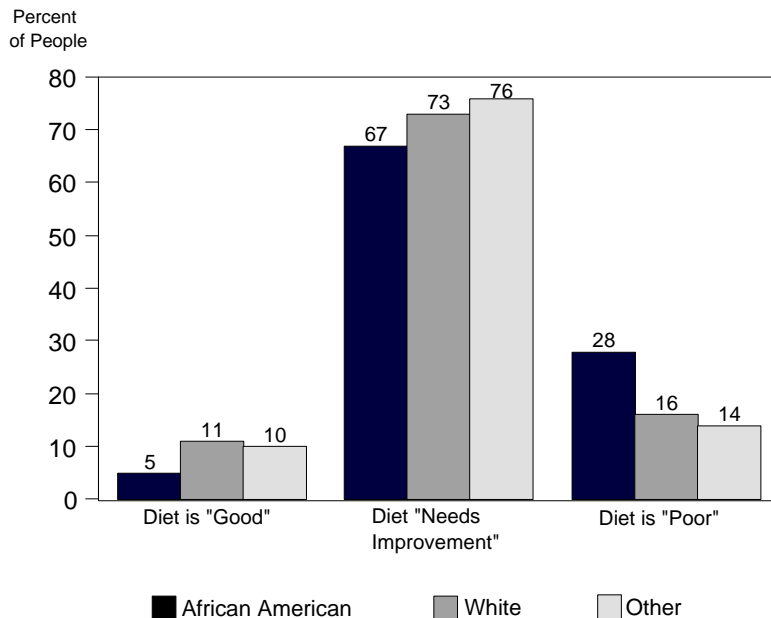
- Component 7 measures saturated fat consumption as a percentage of total food energy intake.
- Component 8 measures total cholesterol intake.
- Component 9 measures total sodium intake.
- Component 10 measures variety in a person's diet.

Each component of the Index has a maximum score of 10 and a minimum score of zero. Intermediate scores are computed proportionately. High component scores indicate intakes close to recommended ranges or amounts; low component scores indicate less compliance with recommended ranges or amounts. The maximum overall score for the 10 components combined is 100. An HEI score above 80 implies a "good" diet, an HEI score between 51 and 80 implies a diet that "needs improvement," and an HEI score less than 51 implies a "poor" diet.

Healthy Eating Index Score for African Americans

The mean HEI score for African Americans is 59, compared with 64 for Whites and 65 for the Other racial group (Asian/Pacific Islander Americans, American Indians, and Alaskan Natives). Only 5 percent of African Americans, compared with 11 percent of Whites,

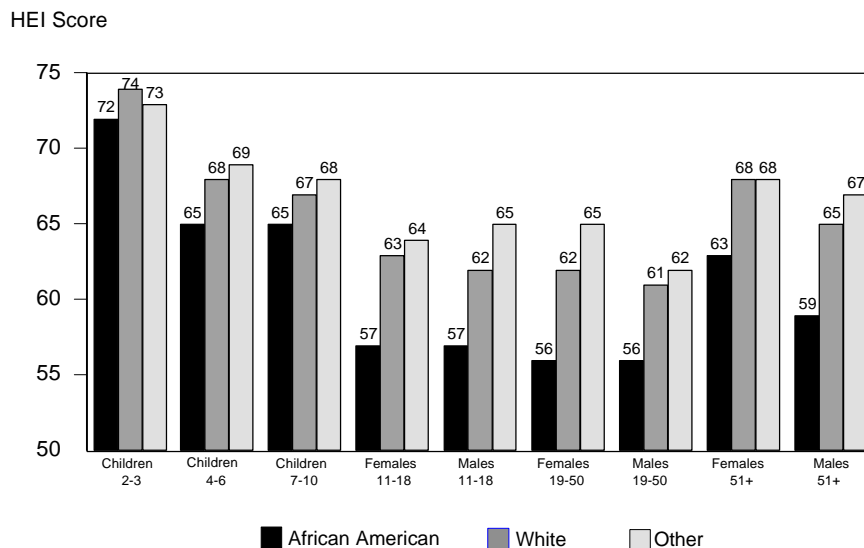
Figure 1. Healthy Eating Index Rating by Race



have a good diet (fig. 1). Twenty-eight percent of African Americans have a poor diet, compared with 16 percent of Whites and 14 percent of the Other racial group. Most people in all three groups have a diet that needs improvement.

African Americans do better on the cholesterol component of the HEI relative to the other components (table). Their cholesterol score averages 7.4 on a scale of zero to 10. Whites and the Other racial group also score well on the cholesterol component. This indicates that Americans in general are heeding the message of consuming a low cholesterol diet. The fruits component has the lowest mean score (3.5) for African Americans, and the milk component, the second lowest score (4.2). African Americans consume lower amounts of fruits and milk products than others do. Prevalence of lactose intolerance could be one reason why African Americans consume less of milk products than others. African Americans score lower than other groups on the total and saturated fat components of the Index; only 31 percent of African Americans meet the dietary recommendation for total fat.

Figure 2. Healthy Eating Index Scores by Race, Age/Gender Subgroups



Compared with Whites, African Americans have a lower average score on most HEI components—exceptions are the meat and sodium components. The higher sodium score (indicating lower sodium intake) may be related to the lower grain score for African Americans: many grain products are high in sodium. African Americans also have a lower average score on most HEI components, compared with the Other racial group. For 9 of the 10 HEI components, fewer than 50 percent of African Americans meet the dietary recommendations.

Healthy Eating Index: Overall and component mean scores for people, by race, 1994-96 (Percent of people meeting the dietary recommendations for each component in parentheses)

	African American	White	Other
Overall	59	64	65
Components			
Grains	6.1 (18)	6.7 (23)	6.9 (27)
Vegetables	5.7 (29)	6.3 (31)	6.2 (31)
Fruits	3.5 (16)	3.9 (17)	4.4 (21)
Milk	4.2 (15)	5.7 (27)	4.9 (23)
Meat	7.0 (35)	6.4 (27)	6.8 (34)
Total fat	6.2 (31)	6.8 (37)	7.4 (42)
Saturated fat	6.0 (35)	6.4 (40)	7.0 (47)
Cholesterol	7.4 (65)	8.0 (72)	7.3 (64)
Sodium	6.6 (39)	6.3 (34)	6.3 (38)
Variety	6.7 (38)	7.8 (54)	7.9 (57)

For milk, only 15 percent of African Americans meet the dietary recommendations on a given day; for fruits, 16 percent; and for grains, 18 percent. For cholesterol, 65 percent of African Americans meet the dietary recommendation.

Healthy Eating Index Score for African Americans by Age/gender

By age/gender subgroups, African Americans have lower overall HEI scores than do Whites and the Other racial group (fig. 2). The HEI score for African American children starts out slightly below the scores of children in

the two other groups: this gap widens as they get older. African American children age 2 to 3 have an HEI score of 72, compared with 74 for Whites in this age group—a 3-percent difference. African American children age 11 to 18 have an HEI score of 57, compared with 62 (males) and 63 (females) for Whites in this age group—about a 10-percent difference.

African American females and males age 19 to 50 have the lowest HEI score (56) among all age/gender subgroups. Whites in this age group have average scores of 61 (males) and 62 (females). African American age 51 and over have higher HEI scores than do younger adult African Americans. The HEI scores of these older African Americans, however, are lower than the scores of Whites and the Other racial group age 51 and over.

Summary

Most Americans have a diet that needs improvement. African Americans are especially prone to having a less-than-ideal diet. This *Nutrition Insight* provides an awareness and better understanding of the types of dietary changes needed to improve the eating patterns of African Americans. Nutrition professionals may use these results in nutrition education and promotion activities to help improve the dietary habits of African Americans.

Note: For more details on the Healthy Eating Index and how it is computed, the reader should see: Bowman, S.A., Lino, M., Gerrior, S.A., Basiotis, P.P. 1998. *The Healthy Eating Index: 1994-96*. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion. CNPP-5. Available at <http://www.usda.gov/cnpp>